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ABSTRACT

This document addresses the negative image of Arabs among the U.S. public. While formal education has created many of the misconceptions about Arabs that abound in the west, many of the misconceptions come from the informal education of popular culture. The western image of the Arab is possibly more interesting than the reality of Arab culture. The American stereotype of Arabs is important for two reasons: (1) it interferes with the understanding of a vitally important area of the world and its people, and (2) the Arab stereotype, while it teaches us little about the Arabs, teaches us a good deal about ourselves and the mechanisms of prejudice. The book examines in sequence different areas of popular culture about Arabs: jokes, cartoons, popular songs, and especially cinema. A chart based on two reference catalogs produced by the American Film Institute in listing every movie form the 1920s and the 1960s, showing the frequency of themes in movies about Arabs, shows three main things: (1) the Arab world has changed, but the Arab stereotype has not; (2) Hollywood's Middle East has become a more sinister place; and (3) there has been a change toward more explicitly anti-Arab movie genres. The document asserts that explanations for the negative stereotypes include the prejudice against Arabs that is part of European folk heritage, the lack of knowledge about Arabs in the United States that reinforces the image of Arabs as "other," and the lack of a significant Arab population in the United States to counter the stereotype. (DK)

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Cruel and Unusual

Negative Images of Arabs in American Popular Culture

By Dr. Laurence Michalak

SO 023 302

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Table of Contents

Introduction 3
Songs 4
Jokes 6
Television 6
Political Cartoons 8
Comics 10
Movies 14
Analyzing the Stereotypes 29
Confronting the Stereotypes 34
References Cited 37
Cartoon Credits 38
About the Author 39

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ADC Issues is published by the ADC Research Institute and informs ADC members on issues of special significance. The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) is a non-sectarian, non-partisan service organization committed to defending the rights and promoting the heritage of Arab-Americans. The largest grass roots Arab-American organization in the United States, ADC was founded in 1980 by former U.S. Senator James Abourezk in response to stereotyping, defamation, and discrimination directed against Americans of Arab descent.

ADC serves its nationwide membership through direct advocacy in cases of defamation, through legal action in cases of discrimination, and through counseling in matters of immigration. ADC publishes information on issues of concern to Arab-Americans and provides education materials on Arab history and culture as well as the ethnic experience of Arabs in America. It also sponsors summer internships in Washington for Arab-American college students. ADC's Middle East Women's & Children's Fund addresses the special needs of victims of violence in the Middle East.

Design by Richard Fletcher.

MIDDLE East specialists sometimes deplore American ignorance about the Arab World—its people, culture, politics and history. Strictly speaking, however, this is not true. Americans know a great deal about Arabs. The problem is that so much of what is known is wrong. The task of learning about the Arab World begins, therefore, not so much with learning new things, but rather with *un*learning the things we thought we knew.

School textbooks and Orientalist scholarship have been deservedly criticized as possible sources of prejudice about Arabs and about the Middle East in general. However, our misconceptions about Arabs probably come at least as much from *in*formal as from formal education. Our negative stereotype of Arabs begins with and is nurtured by what has been called "popular" or "folk" culture—songs, jokes, television programs, cartoons, comic strips, movies and the like.

The Western image of the Arab is a fascinating one—arguably more interesting than the Arabs themselves. It is not that Arabs are uninteresting. Quite the contrary, the Arab World is a diverse and interesting place, and Arabs have made important contributions to Western civilization. However, when we consider the Western image of the Arab—Ali Baba, Sinbad the Sailor, the thief of Baghdad, the slave merchant, the harem dancer, the curse of the mummy, horsemen in flowing robes attacking the Foreign Legion outpost, and so on—we have to admit that, at least in the case of the Arabs, fiction is stranger than truth.

This American stereotype of Arabs is important for two reasons. First, the Arab stereotype interferes with our understanding of a vitally important area of the world and its people. Arabs are by far the majority in the modern Middle East and North Africa, numbering about 155 million people. Second, the Arab stereotype, while it teaches us little about the Arabs, teaches us a good deal about ourselves and about mechanisms of prejudice.

Perhaps the best method to begin a study of the American stereotype of Arabs is to examine in sequence different areas of our popular culture about Arabs—jokes, cartoons, popular songs, and especially cinema. Let us consider, then, some of the many forms in which one encounters the stereotyping of Arabs in daily life.

Songs

POPULAR and folk songs with Arab themes have been present since at least the Roaring Twenties. "The Sheik of Araby" (Snyder 1921), for example, began with the following lyrics:

I'm the sheik of Araby.
Your heart belongs to me.
At night when you're asleep,
Into your tent I'll creep.

[1] 1921, Waterson, Berlin and Snyder Co.

Sigmund Romberg's 1926 operetta "The Desert Song" had a similar theme. It presented the desert as a romantic but dangerous place, where at any moment one might be set upon by Arab raiders singing the "Song of the Riff":

Ho! So we sing as we are riding!
Ho! It's the time you'd best be hiding!
Ho! It means the Riffs are abroad!
Go! Before you've bitten the sword!

[1] 1926, Harms, Inc.

The most recent version of the musical "Kismet" (1955) wove exotic Arab themes through such songs as "Baubles, Bangles and Beads" and "Not since Ninevah." Oscar Brand recorded a bawdy folk ballad called "Kafoozalem," with the refrain,

Heigh-ho Kafoozalem, the harlot of Jerusalem
Prostitute of ill repute and daughter of the Baba!

[1] 1955, Frank Music Corp.

More recent popular songs with Arab themes include "Little Egypt," about a carnival belly dancer ("She walks, she talks, she crawls on her belly like a reptile"). The most popular "Arab" song of the rock-and-roll era has probably been "Ahab the Arab," (pronounce "Ay-rab") recorded in 1962 by Ray Stephens and re-recorded by many others—such as Kinky Friedman.

Let me tell you about Ay-hab, the Ay-rab,
The Sheik of the Burning Sands.

He had emeralds and rubies just dripping off of him
And a ring on every finger of his hands.
He had a big old turban wrapped round his head
And a scimitar by his side
And every evening about midnight
He would get on his camel named Clyde
And ride, straight to the tent of Fatima, etc.

©1962, Lowery Music Co.

The highpoint of "Ahab the Arab" is when Ray Stephens babbles incoherently in imitation of "Arabic."

Kinky Friedman recorded a version of the song "Ahab the Arab" about a stereotypic desert sheik who had "emeralds and rubies just dripping off of him."

Jokes

WE have all heard the jokes about Arabs at one time or another—such as the old saw about Egyptian tanks having backup lights. Arabs themselves are fond of jokes; Egyptians in particular are famous for satire about their own leaders, such as Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak. In the United States, however, jokes about Arabs tend more to racism than to wit.

The Folklore Department at the University of California at Berkeley has files of folk materials, including ethnic jokes, collected by students. Jokes in the file about Arabs show themes of stupidity (six jokes), cowardice (six jokes), and filthiness or repulsiveness (four jokes). Some of the jokes combine more than one theme. Each entry is labelled according to who heard the joke, when, where, and from whom. Although the sample is small, the dates of the entries suggest that jokes about Arabs may have declined after the 1973 war—perhaps because the relative success of the Egyptian and Syrian forces made the jokes about cowardice and stupidity inappropriate.

Television

THE average American probably does not recall ever having met an Arab in person (due in part to the low visibility of Arab-Americans, a problem which we will discuss later). But Americans welcome dozens of Arabs into their living rooms—via television. Setting aside television news, which has its own kind of bias, television's Arabs are a form of modern folklore—fictional figures, not even played by Arab actors. Almost all of them are villains and buffoons—terrorists, Oriental despots, backward sheiks, wealthy playboys, assassins, white slavers, etc.

A mass communications scholar, Dr. Jack Shaheen, reported that an anti-Arab image appeared on a prime time program nearly every other week during a media study conducted from 1975 to 1980. Shaheen noted negatively stereotyped Arabs on such programs as "Vegas," "Fantasy Island," "Bionic Woman," "The Six Million Dollar Man," "Police Woman," "McCloud,"

"Charlie's Angels" has been among the worst offenders in using negative Arab stereotypes.

"Hawaii Five-O," "Cannon," "Columbo," "Medical Center," "Wonder Woman," "Trapper John, M.D." and others. "Charlie's Angels" and "Rockford Files" were among the worst offenders, each with multiple anti-Arab programs. There are also television wrestlers with stage names like "Abdullah the Butcher" and television commercials that stereotype Arabs–by Frigidaire and Volkswagen, for example (Romdhani 1982, Shaheen 1980).

Most offensive, though, is the stereotyping of Arabs in television programs for children, whose views of the world are just being formed (see Shaheen n.d.). Such programs teach children that Arabs are evil and foolish. Cartoons frequently include Arab villains. "Electric Company" features "Spellbinder," a troublemaker who looks vaguely Middle Eastern—swarthy, with a turban and curling moustache. Even "Sesame Street," which usually promotes ethnic pride and interethnic respect, used an Arab figure to illustrate the word "danger."

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Political cartoons

POLITICAL cartoons offer the advantage of being quick and easy to understand. Where a book, an article, or an editorial may be complex, a political cartoon by its very nature must be obvious and unmistakable in intent—pure opinion expressed in images and unencumbered by much fact.

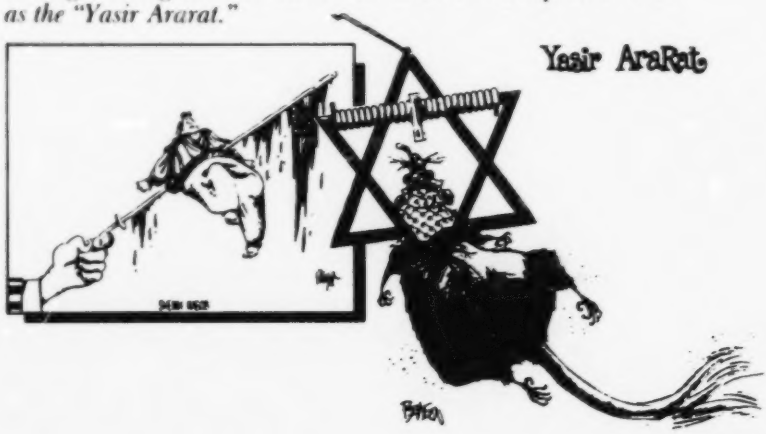
Oliphant of the *Denver Post* produced a classic syndicated cartoon about Arabs in 1974, at the time of the "oil crisis." It shows a group of Arabs—fat, bearded, hooded, hook-nosed, snaggle-toothed, and seated on pillows. A buxom woman dressed like a belly dancer is serving them a roast pig on a steaming platter. One of the Arabs is throwing a single clean-picked bone to a naked and starving Black child, labelled "Africa." The message was presumably that oil price increases were hurting the Third World, offset only by token aid from the Arabs.

This was typical of "political commentary" in the mid-1970s. Americans were angry about higher gasoline prices and frustrated at waiting in long lines at gas stations. The popular mood was receptive to scapegoating. Unfortunately, the Arabs became the scapegoats, vilified throughout the country in editorial-page cartoons, of which Oliphant's was typical.

Thus, Oliphant was able to ignore a number of facts—that American oil companies were making record profits, that OPEC includes several non-Arab countries, that the price increase had been instigated not by Arabs but by the Shah of Iran and that the most populous Arab countries have little or no oil. The roast pig was a particularly offensive detail, since Muslims do not eat pork. A final point, directly contradicting Oliphant's cartoon, is particularly noteworthy. At the time that the cartoon appeared, Saudi Arabia was the world's largest donor of foreign aid: Saudi aid to the Third World was $3 billion per year, and foreign aid donations as a percentage of national product were more than ten times higher in Saudi Arabia than in the United States.

Arab villains in political cartoons are a relatively recent development. The political cartoons in most American newspapers during the 1948 and 1956 Mideast conflicts were, with few exceptions, neutral. The political cartoons of the *San Francisco Chronicle* during Middle East conflicts are a good example. Only one mildly anti-Arab cartoon appeared in the *Chronicle* in

Political cartoonists portrayed Arabs as greedy and rich sheiks (above during the "oil crisis" of the 1970s and as deserving victims during the oil glut. Some resorted to sub-human depictions such as the "Yasir Ararat."



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the 1948 war—attacking the Lebanese for interfering with an American ship bound for Haifa. In the 1956 war, the *Chronicle* also had only one anti-Arab cartoon—criticizing Nasser for nationalizing the Suez Canal. However, there were ten anti-Arab cartoons during the 1967 war and five during the 1973 war.

At their best, political cartoons can be pithy, amusing and thought-provoking, and a certain amount of satire is inherent in the genre. At their worst, however, political cartoons can reflect and perpetuate racist attitudes. Some have gone so far as to portray in a positive light the maiming and killing of Arabs. "Save oil . . . Burn Sheeks," shows an Arab sheik being burned for fuel (Zogby 1982: 5); "Sheikh Kabob" shows an Arab sheik being impaled with a dipstick labeled "oil glut" (Meyer, 3/14/82 *San Francisco Chronicle*); and "Yassir Ararat," shows a rat in a *kaffieh* whose head has been crushed in a trap shaped like a six pointed star (Bensen, 7/1/82 *San Francisco Examiner*). Such cartoons are not limited to a single newspaper, but are of more than local scope; Bensen's political cartoons, for example, are syndicated from the *Arizona Republic* through the Washington Post Writers Group and appear throughout the country.

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, the anti-Arab political cartoon has unfortunately become standard fare on the editorial pages of American newspapers. The portrayal of Arabs in these cartoons has been unrelievedly negative. Sometimes—as in the examples above—it can only be described as racist. James Zogby has correctly noted that such material is comparable to European anti-Semitic cartoons of the World War II era. In both cases a particular ethnic group is being made a scapegoat for the complex economic and political ills of a whole country (Zogby *op cit*).

Comics

ARAB characters appear in daily and Sunday comic strips as well as in comic books. One can open a newspaper and find Arab villains in daily comic strips as diverse as *Broom Hilda, Lolly, Short Ribs, Berry's World, The Wizard of Id* and *Funky Winkerbean.* For example, in a cartoon that appeared at

Thanksgiving in 1979, Dennis the Menace says, "Dewey's havin' meat loaf. His Dad says some Arab is eatin' THEIR Thanksgiving Turkey."

The Sunday comics offer the Arab stereotype in color. Consider some recent examples:

- *Little Orphan Annie* in early 1980 featured a hook-nosed Arab villain named "Bahd-Simel," who attempted to kidnap Annie and hold her ransom for energy-related secrets. The sequence is mitigated somewhat by a good Arab, "Abu Kaftan," who, as Daddy Warbucks puts it, "alone of all his countrymen seems to realize that if the economy of the world is *shattered*—he and his people, being part of this world, must eventually suffer *also*."
- *Barbara Cartland's Romances*, a Sunday comic based on the successful romantic novels of Barbara Cartland, ran a story in early 1982 called "Passions in the Sand." A young Englishwoman goes to Syria to find her cousin. On the ship she sees a horse mistreated by an Arab groom, and later she is kidnapped by a fat, wealthy sheik who tries to force her to marry him.
- A *Bloom County* Sunday comic strip in March 1982 featured a group of insects, one of whom is named "Ahmed," who undertake a "cockroach revolution" and throw a man out of his house.
- *Brenda Starr* is the most frequently anti-Arab of the Sunday comics. In an early 1983 episode, Brenda Starr is held hostage for a "memory chip that will change the face of naval warfare" by Arabs who roll her up in a rug, which they dangle over a cliff. In August, the comic introduced its second Arab villain of 1983—Abu Sindel, a snake-wielding international assassin (*SF Sunday Examiner/Chronicle*, 8/7/83). Shaheen mentions a Brenda Starr story of a previous year which features yet another Arab villain, named "Oily O-le-um."

This same negative Arab stereotype can be found in comic books. An example is the September 1974 issue of the war comic, *Sergeant Rock*. In a story called "A Sergeant Dies," a Roman Legionnaire dies in a battle after killing many of the Egyptian soldiers; a Crusader falls to the Saracens; an American sergeant in North Africa falls to the Germans; and an Israeli sergeant is killed defending a kibbutz against an Arab attack. As one of the Arabs walks away he comments, "If it took so long for us to take *one* hill from *one* sergeant . . . what will it

take to stop his *nation*?" The message is clear: the Romans, Crusaders, Americans and Israelis are the good guys; the Egyptians, Saracens, Germans and Arabs are the bad guys.

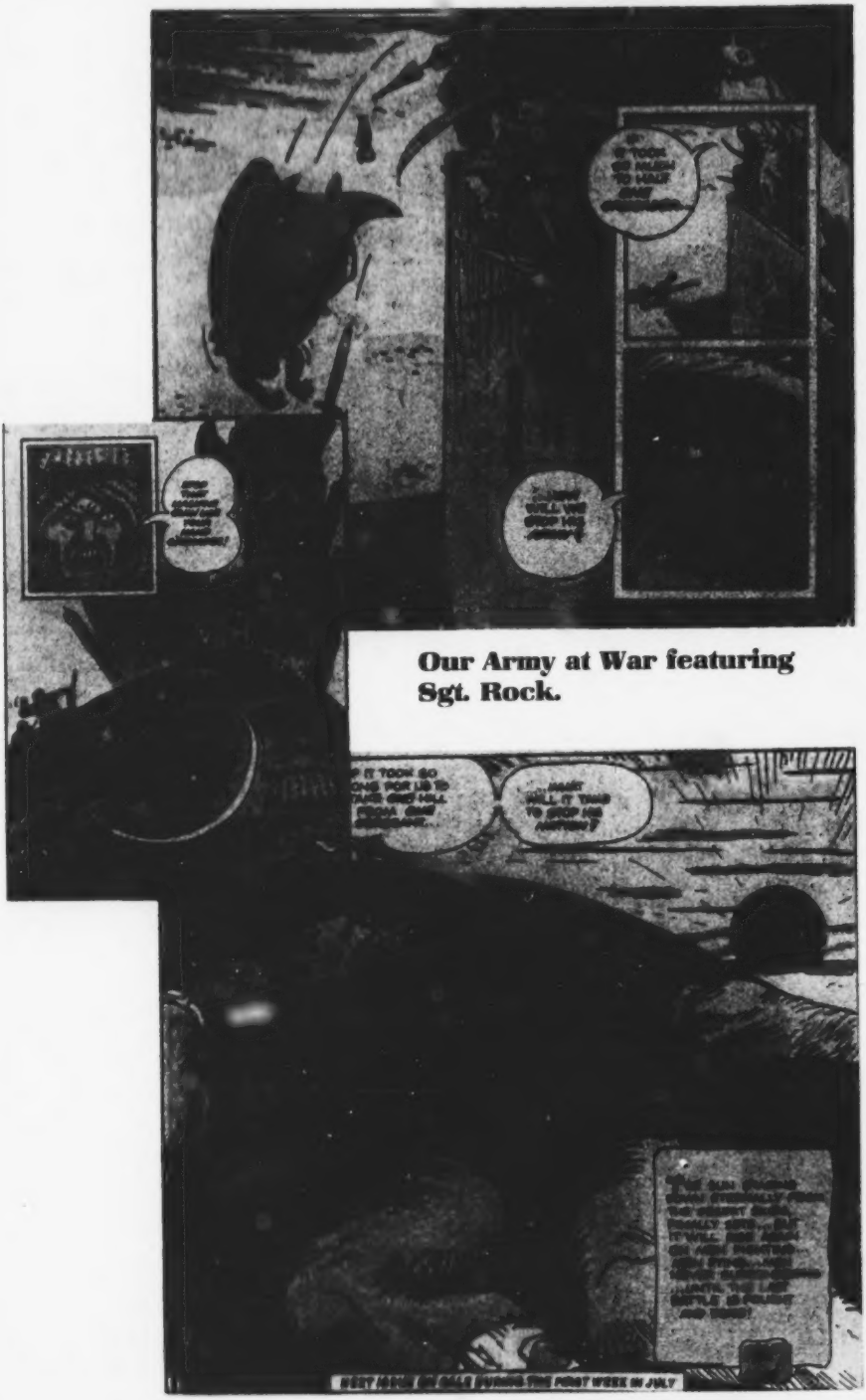
Similar Arab villains can be found in *Conan the Barbarian*, *Tarzan*, and numerous other mainstream comics. *Heavy Metal*, a comic designed for a young adult audience, has a March 1982 story in which a harem flees an evil sultan who swears that he will capture them and feed their flesh to the vultures.

One could continue listing instances of the stereotyping of Arabs in still other categories of American popular culture—billboards, pulp magazines, popular novels, paintings, musicals, plays, etc. However, the main introductory points should by now be clear: that the stereotyping of Arabs is pervasive in American popular culture and daily life, that the Arab stereotype in America is overwhelmingly negative, and that for some reason the norms of ethnic respect in America are not extended to Arabs.

Barbara Cortland's Romances *by Morrow & Weaver*

SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN IN LOVE WITH YOUR COUSIN FOR YEARS, AND UNABLE TO HAVE HER, BUT NOW I HAVE YOU! AND I MEAN TO KEEP YOU!
KEEP ME?

On the facing page are other examples of "evil" Arabs in the comics.



Our Army at War featuring Sgt. Rock.

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Movies

RATHER than continue a catalog of diverse slurs, let us instead investigate in greater depth the Arab stereotype in a single key category of American popular culture—the movies. Cinema is undoubtedly the area of popular culture which offers the most detailed picture of the American stereotype of Arabs, both now and in its historical development. In its origins and in its world distribution, cinema is a particularly American phenomenon and a powerful cultural force.

Americans love the movies, and never more than in recent years. The *1983 International Motion Picture Almanac* reports that Americans annually spend nearly $3 billion for movie tickets. There were about 1,100,000,000 admissions to films in America's 16,712 movie theatres in 1981—up 4.5% over 1980. Of the total American public over age twelve, 27% are frequent moviegoers (once a month or more) and another 24% are occasional moviegoers (once every 2–6 months). Younger and more impressionable people are the biggest movie fans; most avid are the 16–20 year old age group, most of whom are in the "frequent" category (Gertner 1983). Even after they leave the theatre circuit, old movies still don't die; instead they reappear on the television late show.

American cinema has been fascinated from its very beginnings with the idea of the Arab. The world's first film studio was built by Thomas Edison in 1893 in West Orange, New Jersey, and one of Edison's first films—designed for the kinetoscope, a coin-operated viewer-box—was called "The Dance of the Seven Veils" (Allen 1979, 11–12).

With the development of film projection technology, moving pictures progressed from viewer-boxes to theatres, spreading throughout the world—especially throughout Europe and the United States. After World War I, with Europe in ruins, America moved during the prosperous 1920s into pre-eminence in world cinema, a position it has never relinquished.

What people enjoyed on the screen, then as now, was the exotic, and the most exotic setting imaginable was the Middle East. At least 87 films were produced in the 1920s which had major or minor "Arab" themes. The list of actors and actresses who played in these exotic films reads like a *Who's Who* of early American cinema. Leading men such as Gary Cooper, William Powell, Ronald Colman and Ramon Novarro fought in the

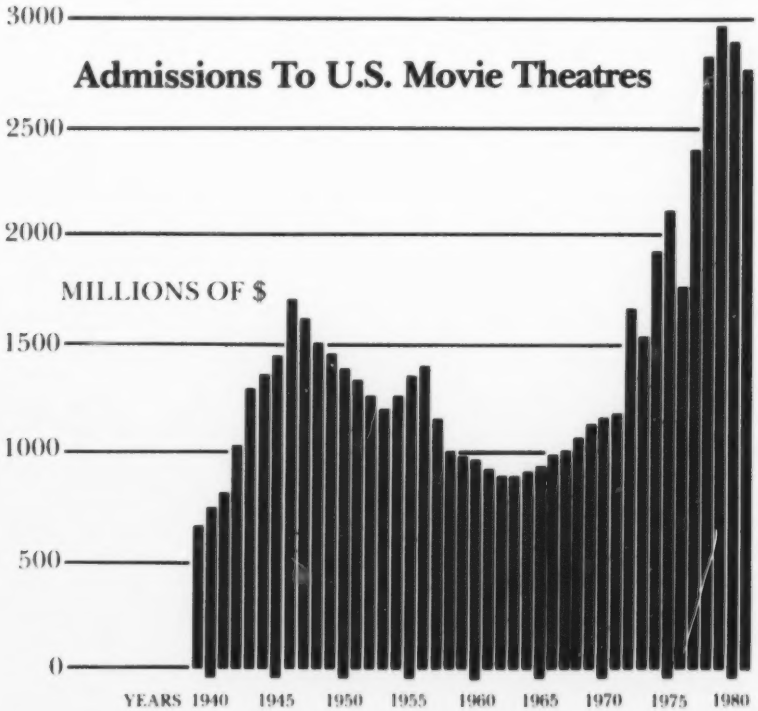
Foreign Legion or rescued legendary beauties such as Alice Terry, Pola Negri, Gloria Swanson and Norma Talmadge from evil sheiks. Tom Mix and Hoot Gibson rode the range with Arabs. The evil Bela Lugosi was there. Oliver Hardy appeared in *One Stolen Night* in a straight hero role, and William

***Rudolph Valentino in* The Sheik *(1921) and* Son of the Sheik *(1926) (top left, bottom) portrayed the Arab as a lusty abductor of white women. Top right is a scene from* Ali Baba Goes to Town.

Boyd—later famous as Hopalong Cassidy—appeared with Mary Astor and Boris Karloff in *Two Arabian Knights*, a romantic comedy set in Palestine in World War I.

These 1920s films about the Middle East fall into two main groups. Most are exotic adventure melodramas set in the desert. In these, Arabs are associated with violence and sexuality—abducting white women or sweeping in hordes out of the desert to attack the Foreign Legion outpost. A second genre of Middle East movies is the light comedy, with Arabs as buffoons, sometimes good-natured and sometimes not.

The best-known exotic adventure melodramas of this period are probably Rudolph Valentino's movies—*The Sheik* and *Son*



Source: International Motion Picture Almanacs (1980 and 1983 Eds.)

Americans are avid moviegoers and cinema is a powerful force in shaping their world-view. After a lull in mid-century, due probably to the impact of television, cinema attendance has soared to record heights in recent years.

of the Sheik—silent movies which inspired no less than a cult. A photograph of Valentino clad in flowing robes, standing at the entrance to a tent, glowering down at a flimsily clad girl he has swept into his arms, is a standard entry in every coffee table book on the history of cinema.

These Middle East melodramas of the 1920s set the tone for countless films to come. The themes they contained are apparent from some typical plots:

- *The Sheik* (1921): An English girl goes on an adventure to the Sahara disguised as a slave girl in a gambling casino, where she meets and is captured by Sheik Ahmed, who tries to force her to surrender to his will.
- *The Song of Love* (1923): Ramlika, an Arab chief in Algeria, has plans to drive out the French and to crown himself king in North Africa; he is later killed by the French troops.
- *A Cafe in Cairo* (1924): An Arabian desert bandit, Kali, kills a British couple, sparing their small daughter on condition that one day she be given him in marriage. She is rescued by an Englishman, Barry Braxton, but not before Braxton is bound by the Arab villain and thrown into the Nile.
- *The Arab* (1924): Jamil, the son of a Bedouin tribal leader, is disowned by his father for a desert raid at the time of the feast of Ramadan. He is reformed by Mary, the missionary's daughter.
- *A Son of the Sahara* (1924): A boy, Raoul, is reared by a desert tribe. Later he falls in love with Barbara, an officer's daughter, who rejects him until she finds that he is not really an Arab.
- *Son of the Sheik* (1926): A boy, Ahmed, falls in love with Yasmin, a dancer and daughter of a renegade Frenchman. Believing Yasmin has tricked him, Ahmed abducts her and is about to rape her when his father, the Sheik, intervenes.
- *The Desert Bride* (1928): A French officer and his sweetheart are captured by Arab nationalists. Kassim Ben Ali, their leader tortures them both, but they resist, escape, and Kassim is killed in the end.

The Arab in these films is associated with theft, abduction, rape, knives, fighting, murder, sexuality, and anti-Western attitudes. However, he is not completely bad. The early screen Arabs played by Douglas Fairbanks and Rudolph Valentino possessed a certain primitive charm. Fairbanks' Arab, though, is still a lazy thief in *The Thief of Baghdad* and Valentino's Arab

in *The Sheik* turns out at the end of the film to be not an Arab at all, but the son of a European. The sexual racism is apparent; the Arab lusts after a white woman, whom he tries to capture, but interracial love is not allowed—unless the Arab is really a European.

Of course these films were only loose representations of the Middle East. They were intended mainly as entertainment. American movie-makers were marketing exoticism in an attempt to draw money-paying crowds. As Leon Carl Brown has pointed out in criticism of *The Desert Song*, the Moroccan Rif is mountains, not desert (Brown 1981). Another example of ignorance of the Middle East on the part of screen writers is the "Arab" names they chose. All too often the "Arab" names from serious films are ridiculously improbable—such as Kali, Kada, Chala, Ahleef, Metaab, Batooka, Irad Ben Sabam, and Chidder Ben-Ek.

These films were representative of the popular literature from which they drew their plots—novels, plays, magazine stories and serials. There were relatively few original screenplays. For example, a novel by Edgar Selwyn was the source for the plot of *The Arab*. *Beau Geste* was also a novel in 1924 before coming to the screen. *Kismet* was a play by Edward Knoblock before its numerous film versions. And *Desert Song* was a successful stage musical in 1926 before being adapted as a film.

These early films of the 1920s were mainly silent black-and-white productions of five to eight reels. In 1928 and 1929, we see the appearance of some sound technology, with Movietone musical scores, sound effects and some talking sequences. *Beau Geste* in 1926 featured a short experimental color sequence. *Renegades* (1930) was the first full sound production among movies with Middle East themes.

THE 1930s and 1940s brought new film technologies, and larger budgets—but there was no reason to change the themes, since they continued to attract people to theaters. There were remakes and re-remakes of the same films, as in *The Garden of Allah* (1927, 1936), *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924, 1940, 1961, 1978), and *Kismet* (1920, 1930, 1944, 1955). Ronald Colman's original *Beau Geste* has been redone so many times—including the still-televised Gary Cooper and Telly Savalas versions, (1939 and 1966)—that Marty Feldman entitled

Moviemakers perpetuated Arab stereotypes every time they produced a re-make of an older film. The image of the "exotic Arab East" remained constant in the 1930 (right) and 1955 (below) versions of Kismet.

his 1977 Foreign Legion comedy spoof, "The Last Remake of Beau Geste."

Often the Arab is only part of the background—invisible or faceless. *Casablanca* (1942), with Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, one of the most famous films in history, is a good example: it has Americans, French, German and even Czech characters, but where are the Arabs? Apart from a minor Moroccan villain played by Sidney Greenstreet, there are no Arab

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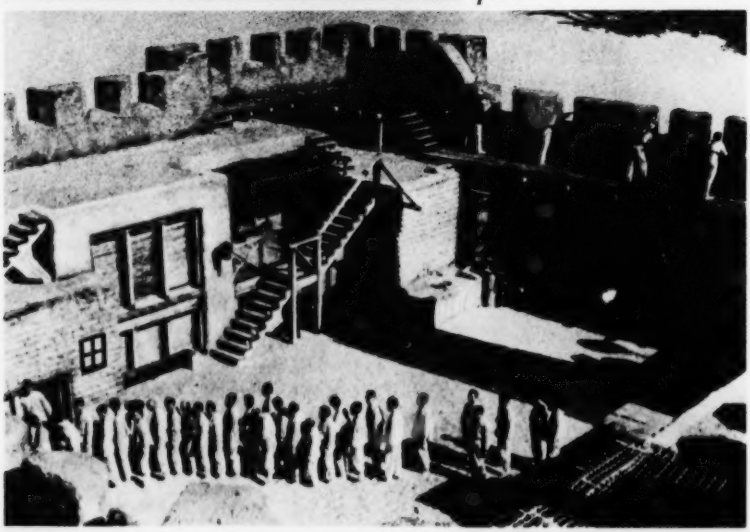
characters, which is odd considering that the story is set mainly in Morocco. Leon Carl Brown has also noted the irony of the scene in which the French sing the "Marseillaise" to drown out the Germans singing "Die Wacht am Rhein"—"both national groups being on alien soil blithely ignoring the mute claims to independence and identity of their reluctant Moroccan host" (Brown 1981). As in many other adventure films, the Arabs simply provide an exotic and slightly sinister background—a



Countless Foreign Legion melodramas glorified European colonialism in Arab North Africa. The 1939 (bottom) and 1979 (top) versions of Beau Geste *are just two examples.*

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colonial setting for the comings and goings of Westerners.

No inventory of Middle East film genres would be complete without mention of the "mummy" movies. Boris Karloff's *The Mummy* (1932) has a typical plot: a mummy revives after thousands of years and pursues an innocent Western woman that he believes is the reincarnation of his mate. Frequently, it is the penetration by Westerners into a forbidden place, such as a tomb, that activates a curse and brings the vengeful mummy to life. Many of the great horror specialists enacted mummy roles—including Boris Karloff in *The Mummy* (1932), and Lon Chaney in *The Mummy's Tomb* (1942) and *The Mummy's Curse* (1944).

The mummy genre was successful because it paired a frightening creature with a sinister setting. The mummy, the Middle Easterner, is a threatening figure. As in the "sheik" movies, we find the threat of miscegenation—the Middle Eastern male, in the horrible guise of the mummy, relentlessly pursuing the Western woman but—thank goodness!—never quite catching her.

DURING the period after World War II, production costs increased—from an average of $400,000 per film in 1941 to over $1 million in 1949, and to $11.3 million in 1982 (Getner *op cit*). There had been many small companies in the 1920s but such high capital requirements gradually led to an industry dominated by just a few. Cinema also became an international business, with international stars and coproductions among American, British, Italian and French film companies.

In the 1950s and 1960s Hollywood continued to make light comedies in Middle Eastern settings—such as Donald O'Connor's *The Wonders of Aladdin* (1961) and Elvis Presley's *Harum Scarum* (1965). But these films were not always innocuous. For example, in *Kiss the Other Sheik* (1968), a Roman husband attempts to sell his wife to a series of Arabs, the first of whom tries to cheat him and the last of whom turns out to be a homosexual, more interested in the husband than the wife.

Another kind of film about the Middle East is the "strong man" movies, which substituted muscles for Douglas Fairbanks' acrobatics. Examples include Steve Reeves' *Thief of Baghdad* (1961), a swashbuckling *Captain Sinbad* (1963), and *The Mighty Crusaders* (1961), in which the conquering Christians hack at bald-headed Saracens.

The Middle East continued to be a favorite setting for war, spy and adventure movies. Examples from the 1960's include *Desert Attack* (1961), *Desert Patrol* (1962), and *Where the Spies Are* (1966). *Flight of the Phoenix* (1966) is a good example of the faceless Arab in a sinister setting: James Stewart pilots a plane that crashes in the Libyan desert; two of the passengers approach an Arab caravan for help, and the Arabs cut their throats for no apparent reason.

Some of the films of the 1960s allowed a faint glimmer of humanity in their generally negative portrayals of the Arabs. An example is *Lawrence of Arabia*, which in 1962 won seven Academy Awards, including best motion picture. The film shows that the British reneged on their promises of independence to the Arabs. But the Arabs emerge as incompetents, hopelessly divided by tribal jealousies. When they reach Damascus before the British, the Arabs quarrel among themselves and are unable to run the city. After a day or two, the Arabs slink out and the British move in. The film version of history here is false, since the Arabs under Faisal governed Damascus for two years, until they were driven out by the French army, not the British.

Another film that is not entirely negative toward Arabs is *Khartoum* (1966), about the Mahdi-led Sudanese revolt of 1883. In this primarily British production, Laurence Olivier endowed the role of the Mahdi with considerable power and dignity. Generally, though, the Sudanese come off as half-naked fanatics, eventually impaling General Gordon (Charlton Heston) with a spear.

Beginning in the 1950s, a popular new cinema genre developed around the Arab-Israeli conflict. At least ten films were made on this theme in the 1960s alone. *Survival* (1968) is a travelogue-documentary, juxtaposing WWII concentration camp footage and the June war. *Journey to Jerusalem* (1968) is a documentary of a concert on Mount Scopus, celebrating the unification of Jerusalem under Israeli rule. *Exodus* (1960), *Judith* (1966) and *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1966) are all strongly pro-Israeli films.

In these war movies, Israelis and their American friends are played by popular actors such as Kirk Douglas, Yul Brynner, John Wayne, Frank Sinatra, Paul Newman, and Sal Mineo. The Arabs, on the other hand, are cruel soldiers, unseen or seen only from a distance. In *Exodus*, for example, they brutally kill a 15-year old refugee girl, played by Jill Haworth, and

In the 1960 film Exodus, *Arabs are portrayed as cruel terrorists seen only from a distance. In other motion pictures, however, they are presented with some dignity. In* Khartoum *Laurence Olivier played the Sudanese Mahdi. And despite some historical inaccuracies,* Lawrence of Arabia *showed a faint glimmer of humanity in the generally negative portrayal of Arabs.*

in *Cast a Giant Shadow*, described by the *New York Times* reviewer as "the latest chapter of Hollywood's history of Israel," the Arabs leer and laugh as they shoot at an Israeli woman trapped in a truck at the bottom of a valley.

These movies present the Israeli-Arab conflict in much the same way as Cowboys and Indians: the Arabs are always the bad guys, the Israelis the good guys. The point here is not that

A plot by Arab terrorists to kill the spectators in the Superbowl provides the suspense for Black Sunday *(left) and Arabs are called "medieval fanatics" by Peter Finch in* Network *(below).*

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the films should have reversed the formula—Arab good guys and Israeli bad guys would be equally stereotypic—but simply that cinema should refrain from gross oversimplifications which distort history and interfere with understanding the Middle East. *Exodus*, for example, is based on Leon Uris's 1958 best-seller, which was condemned as highly inaccurate by a wide range of publications—including *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* (Gilroy 1958), *Midstream* (Sykin 1959), *The New York Post* (Boroff 1959), *Congress Bi-Weekly* (Kahn 1959), *Israel Horizons* (Leon 1959), and *Commentary* (Blocker 1959).

From the standpoint of avoiding stereotyping, it is ironic that those Israeli movies which have been shown in the United States have tended to be better than American ones. For example, *They Were Ten* (1961), set in Palestine in the late 19th Century, deals with a group of Russian exiles who settle in Palestine and win over their initially hostile Arab neighbors. *Salah* (1965) satirizes the Israeli bureaucracy, with an Arab Jew as its main character. *Sands of Beersheba* (1966) includes among its characters the peaceful patriarch of an Arab hamlet. In *Clouds over Israel* (1966), set in the Sinai in the 1956 war with Egypt, an Israeli anti-Arab softens when he is befriended behind enemy lines.

THE stereotyping of Arabs in American cinema has continued into the 1970s and 1980s. Some examples:

- In *The Wind and the Lion* (1975) Sean Connery plays an Arab described by one critic as "a 1904 forerunner of today's terrorists kidnapping an American woman (Candice Bergen) in Morocco and making huge ransom demands on President Theodore Roosevelt" (Eames 1975, 369). The film's claim to historical truth is rather loose, since in the 1904 incident the person captured was a male.
- *Network* (1977) has a bitter anti-Arab scene in which a crusading television news commentator, played by Peter Finch, warns that the Arabs are taking control of America. He calls the Arabs "medieval fanatics" (mistakenly referring to the Shah of Iran as an Arab). The film won four Academy Awards.
- *Black Sunday* (1977), based on a best-selling novel by Thomas Harris, concerns an Arab terrorist plot to kill the spectators at the Superbowl—including the President of the United States—with a horrible device to be detonated in a

television blimp over the stadium. An Israeli major is the hero and the Arabs are the villains. Oddly, the film attributes a fictitious act to a real organization—the Palestinians of the Black September group.

- *The Black Stallion* (1979) shows Arab grooms aboard a ship mistreating a horse. When a boy comforts the horse, an Arab catches him and twists the boy's ear and when the ship is sinking, the Arab comes at the boy with a knife and steals his life jacket. The classic children's novel by James Farley, upon which the film is based, had no such evil Arab characters.
- In *Rollover* (1981) "the Arabs" destroy the world financial system. In publicity interviews, Jane Fonda has made her movie's message explicit: "If we aren't afraid of Arabs, we'd better examine our heads. They have strategic power over us. They are unstable, they are fundamentalists, tyrants, anti-woman, anti-free press. That we have to depend on them is monstrous." (quoted in Anderson 1981) Reviewers have pointed out that the film is inaccurate and racist (Aufderheide 1982), and that "the 'Arab Conspiracy,' like the 'Jewish Conspiracy' before it, scapegoats a group of people for a potpourri of economic ills" (Johnson 1982).
- *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) is another film set partly in the Middle East, but in which the Middle Easterners form a generally sinister background. The minor Egyptian character who helps the archaeologist hero to find the lost Ark of the Covenant is more than offset by another character, a scimitar-wielding Arab who is in league with the Nazis.
- *Paradise* (1982) is the story of a teenaged boy and girl in a Middle Eastern desert oasis—"with no adult supervision and almost no clothing" (Variety 5/12/82). An Arab slave trader called "The Jackal" pursues the English girl into the desert, slaughtering and raping. In the end David, the boy, shoots the Arab villain dead with bow and arrow.
- *Wrong is Right* (1982), based on Charles McCarry's novel *The Better Angels*, stars Sean Connery as a television news reporter. The story involves "an Arab king who seems ready to turn over two mini-atom bombs to a Khaddafi-like revolutionary leader, with the devices to be detonated in Israel, and later New York," unless the U.S. president resigns (Variety 4/7/82). A typical line: "No trouble today because there are no Arabs on the street."

Syrian-American filmmaker Moustafa Akkad has produced two films that portray Arabs in a realistic manner: Lion of the Desert *(left) with Anthony Quinn and* The Message *(below), a dramatization of the origins of Islam.*

29

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- In *Trenchcoat* (1983), Margot Kidder plays a stenographer who flies to Malta in search of experiences upon which to base a novel. She is caught in a web of multinational intrigue and kidnapped by Arab terrorists who inject her with a huge hypodermic needle (People 3/28/83, p. 6).
- *The Black Stallion Returns* (1983) opens with an Arab villain with a hypodermic needle attacking a horse. This image is somewhat mitigated later in the film, with the introduction of "Good Arab" characters who eventually overcome the "Bad Arabs." Advertisements for the film unfortunately emphasize the "Bad Arabs," showing the boy on his horse in a Middle Eastern setting, fleeing from sinister, spear-carrying figures on horseback.

  More such films with Arab themes are in prepartion.
- *Sahara*, directed by Menahem Golaan and currently being filmed in Israel, features Brooke Shields in the role of a girl who "is kidnapped, raped and finally charmed off her feet by an Arab sheik, played by Richard Gere" (Variety 3/31/82). The advance poster for the film shows an Arab on horseback brandishing a sword and carrying off a white woman.
- Louis Malle is reportedly preparing a film on "Abscam"—an operation in which FBI agents posed as "sheiks," on the assumption that Arabs are the kind of people who offer bribes.
- Paramount Pictures is reportedly considering a $15 million dollar movie version of the novel, *The Fifth Horseman*. The plot concerns Palestinians with Libyan support planting a nuclear bomb in New York City.

Despite this trend of increasingly negative portrayal of Arabs, there are at least a few encouraging counterexamples. Moustafa Akkad, a Syrian-American filmmaker, has produced two films that portray Arabs in a less stereotyped and more realistic manner.

- *The Message* (1977) (also called *Mohammad, Messenger of God)* is a dramatization of the origins of Islam. It portrays the revelation to the Prophet Mohammad (who is never shown on-screen) and the subsequent spread of the Islamic faith. The film was done in two versions—one in Arabic with Arab actors and one with Anthony Quinn, Irene Pappas and other actors, for Western audiences.
- *Lion of the Desert* (1981), Akkad's second film, is about Omar

Mukhtar, a Libyan Bedouin hero who fought Mussolini's Fascist armies in Libya. Omar Mukhtar led Libyan resistance fighters against Italy's mechanized army of tanks and cannon for twenty years, until his capture in 1931. The film maintains a scrupulously high level of historical accuracy and has had a measure of popular success.

An example of a recent potentially positive film with Arab characters is *Hanna K.*, scheduled for release in fall 1983. An article from the *New York Times* wire services reports that this French-produced, English-language Universal Studios film by Greek director Constantine Costa-Gavras, starring Jill Clayburgh, "leans toward the Palestinian side." The film "asks whether Palestinians can get justice from the Israelis and answers negatively." Although Costa-Gavras "does not treat its Israeli characters with the same hostility he applied to the American officials in *Missing*," he nevertheless "presents the Israelis as arrogant but conscience-ridden masters whose sense of fairness can be lost in their fear of Arab claims to Israel's soil" (Harmetz, 1983).

Analyzing the Stereotypes

LET us pause at this point for a moment and ask ourselves whether we are being too harsh on the film industry. Granted, a considerable number of films have clearly stereotyped and defamed Arabs. But can we legitimately generalize that the American cinema industry as a whole has consistently defamed Arabs?

An objective answer lies in two reference catalogs produced by the American Film Institute—one for films of the 1920s and the other for films of the 1960s (Munden 1971). (These are the only two that have been issued so far.) There is information on every American film made during these two decades—including a plot synopsis and a list of the major themes in each film. For example, the themes listed for the Rudolph Valentino 1920s film *Son of the Sheik* are: sheiks, thieves, charlatans, dancers, jealousy, abduction, ransom, deserts, and Arabia. The chart below tallies the most frequent themes in the 87 Middle East films from the 1920s, and the 118 Middle East

films of the 1960s, to get a profile of the stereotype of Arabs—to see whether it is indeed negative and whether there has been any change from the 1920s to the 1960s. These statistics on movie themes show three main things:

1. *The Arab World has changed, but the Arab stereotype has not.* Royalty, deserts, sheiks and harems were the mainstays of the Arab stereotype in both the 1920s and the 1960s. In the 1920s, most Arab countries were indeed monarchies. But this is currently true of only a few Arab countries—mainly smaller ones. Also, few Arabs live in the desert anymore. Sheiks are rare: most Arab governments are Western in form, with ministries and parliaments. Polygamy has been abolished in many countries, and "harems" are quite rare.

2. *Hollywood's Middle East has become a more sinister place.* The Arab stereotype in the 1920s was one primarily of exoticism. It contained negative elements, to be sure—such as abduction, theft, jealousy, bandits, revenge and slavery—but these were relatively minor themes, occurring further down the list. The 1960s list, on the other hand, shows an increasing incidence of violence in the Arab stereotype. "Murder" registered a spectacular increase, moving from 27th place in the 1920s theme list up to second place in the 1960s list. Slavery, theft and abduction all moved into the top ten themes; and a number of new violent and illicit themes have appeared—perfidy, torture, explosions, prostitution, revolts, smuggling and treason.

3. Finally, *there has been a change toward more explicitly anti-Arab movie genres.* Arab-Israeli wars have entered the list, and spy and war movies have become more common. Another new kind of movie is the pornographic film, of which the AFI catalog lists at least a dozen which are related to Arabs. Some examples are *The Politicians* (1970), in which women are procured for an Arab sheik, *Eve and the Merman* (1965), in which a woman fantasizes about being part of a harem, and *Fly Now, Pay Later* (1969), in which Moroccans are portrayed as abducting and sexually abusing airline hostesses.

THUS, there is overwhelming and undeniable evidence that there exists a harshly pejorative stereotype of Arabs in American cinema. Given this, a number of questions arise: what promotes such an image, where does it come from, and why does it persist?

Some point to the prominence of Jews in the American film

industry as a possible explanation for the negative stereotyping of Arabs in cinema. American Jews tend to be supportive of Israel, and this may have some influence. Such an explanation is unsatisfactory, however, for a number of reasons. First, polls indicate Americans in general tend to be pro-Israeli—Jews only slightly more so than other groups. Second, Arabs are stereotyped not just in cinema, but in other areas of popular culture as well. And finally, the negative element in the stereotype of Arabs is much older than the Arab-Israeli conflict or the invention of cinema. It is important not to scapegoat Jews for the scapegoating of Arabs.

Where, then, did this negative image come from? The Arab stereotype did not originate in America. A negative stereotype of the Middle East has existed in Europe at least since the spread of Islam. Europeans feared Middle Eastern peoples as the formidable adversaries they indeed sometimes were. After all, the Arabs conquered Southern Europe up to Central France, and in Eastern Europe the Ottoman successors of the Arabs fought to the very gates of Vienna. Later, in the 19th century, the Middle East came to represent potential colonial possessions and subject peoples. The Middle Eastern stereotype can be seen in European proverbs, novels, plays, travelogues, poetry and painting. Such prejudices are simply part of America's European folk heritage.

Stereotyping is a universal phenomenon—a kind of folk social science. From an early age, we all have ideas of what people in other parts of the world might be like. We populate our mental worlds with stereotypes, drawn unfortunately but necessarily from second-hand sources. However, not all stereotypes are negative or racist. Arabs stereotype Americans too. But they do not mass produce and market a negative stereotype of us, as we do of them.

T.E. Adorno and other scholars of the Frankfurt School have described the process through which people construct stereotypes, beginning with a perceptual dichotomy between "self" and "other" (Adorno 1969). In such a way "Arab" in American popular culture has become "other"—a category into which we project the negation of our values and the enactment of our taboos.

Arabs are not the only ethnic group in America to suffer from negative stereotyping. At different historical periods, other groups have had to contend with similar treatment—Blacks, Irish, Jews, American Indians, Japanese, Poles and

others. Cinema has also stereotyped other groups besides Arabs—Stepin Fetchits, the inscrutable Charlie Chan, bloodthirsty Indians, Mexican bandits, Russian Cold War villains, and so on. But many of these ethnic groups have protested effectively. Arabs are one of the few groups who are still fair game for slander. As one critic wrote, "Arabs have replaced Commies and Nazis as the new movie meanies (Rainer 1981)."

One major reason why the "Arab" has come to represent "otherness" is probably that Arabs are the major world people that Americans know least about.

Things that might have mitigated the negative stereotyping of Arabs have been absent in America. For example, there was no significant Arab population to counter the stereotype. Arabs have made up only a small percentage of the American melting pot. The 1980 census estimated Americans of Arab origin at only 0.9 of one percent of the population. The Arabs who migrated to America at the turn of the century were primarily poor Lebanese and Syrian Christians. Thus, Arab-Americans were not strictly representative of Middle Eastern Arabs, the great majority of whom are Muslim.

Until recently, Americans of Arab origin have not been a very visible minority group. The average American, at least in urban settings, encounters people who are identifiably African, Asian, Latin American and European in descent—but very few Arabs. Few people can name any prominent Arab-Americans; if they think hard, they may come up with Sirhan Sirhan, but most are unaware that Danny Thomas and Ralph Nader are of Arab origin. This lack of visibility of Arab-Americans may be due to repressed ethnicity. Such was the case with Japanese-Americans in the middle of this century: because of the war Japanese ethnicity was unpopular. An indication of repressed ethnicity has been the tendency of Arab immigrants not to pass on knowledge of Arabic to their children, to a greater degree than is true of immigrant groups speaking other languages. It is estimated that 20 percent of the second generation and 70 percent of the third generation of Arab-Americans can neither understand nor read Arabic (Elkholy 1969, 12). Neglect of the language of origin may also have arisen from relative poverty and upward mobility among early Arab immigrants.

Arabs in America are by no means a corporate, well-organized interest group. Rather, they are a diverse people, originating in different countries, speaking different dialects, pro-

Frequency of Themes in Movies About Arabs

1921–1930

no. of films	theme
18	foreign legion
17	royalty
16	Egypt/Egyptian
14	sheiks
13	Arabs, deserts
12	Sahara
11	Arabia
10	bedouins, Algeria/Algerians
9	dancers
8	disguise, harems, Morocco, Paris
7	British Army, infidelity
6	England/English, abduction/kidnapping, theft/thieves
5	Africa, brothers, courtship, Islam, jealousy, nobility
4	alcoholism, bandits, filial relations, France/French, murder, physicians, revenge, slavery, spies, World War I
87	**Total**

1961–1970

no. of films	theme
32	royalty
24	murder
20	Americans in foreign countries, deserts
17	harems
16	slaves/slavers/slavery
14	sheiks
13	Egypt/Egyptians, theft/thieves
12	abduction, Algeria/Algerians, perfidy, torture
10	air pilots, explosions/explosives, Morocco, police
9	London, marriage, prostitutes/prostitution, revolts, smugglers/smuggling
8	disguise, documentation, filial relations, photographs, soldiers
7	Beirut, Germans, jealousy, infidelity, Jews, revenge, self-sacrifice, traitors/treason, World War II
118	**Total**

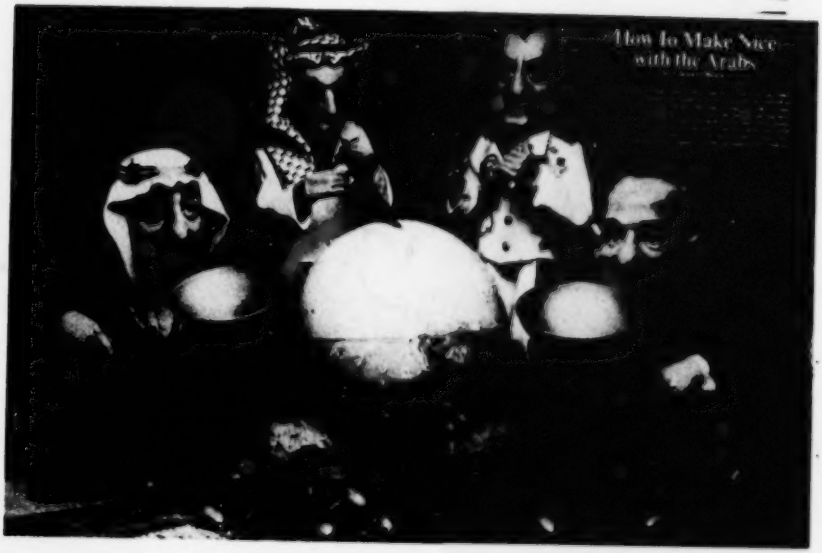
fessing different religions and espousing different political programs. Arab-related groups in America have diverse memberships—including Arab-Americans, Arab students, recent non-naturalized immigrants, non-Arab spouses, and so on. Some groups (such as the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee) appeal to all Arabs, some to Arabs of one nationality (such as Egyptian or Yemeni organizations), and some to only one community (such as the Ramallah Club, whose members come from a single Arab community on the West Bank). Most Arab-American groups are relatively apolitical, tending more to cultural or community self-help activities. However, they are becoming more politically involved, no doubt partly in response to the public slurs they suffer so regularly.

Thus there have been relatively few Arab-Americans; they have tended to assimilate; they have been unrepresentative of Arabs in general; they have low visibility; most of their organizations are apolitical; and few of them have been willing to speak out against the defamation of Arabs. Americans have little contact with Arabs at home or abroad, and this estrangement has no doubt contributed in good measure to stereotyping and misinformation.

Confronting the Stereotypes

THERE have been recent indications of possible improvement of the image of Arabs. In recent years, Arab-Americans have become more assertive of the validity of their ethnic heritage. One reason for this is that immigration from the Arab World has changed since the turn of the century. Whereas Arab immigrants were once heavily Lebanese or Syrian, immigrants to America today include numerous Egyptians and Palestinians and are more broadly representative of the Arab World. These new Arab-Americans and the children of the older generation of Arab-Americans tend to be professionals, highly educated, and less disposed to accept defamation. Typical of the new breed of Arab-Americans is Detroit lawyer Abdeen Jabara. When the Nixon administration in the 1970s targeted him as part of "Operation Boulder," a program of harassment and electronic surveillance of individuals of Ara-

Stereotypes abound in books and magazines as well. Erica Jong's Fear of Flying *has a chapter called "Arabs and Other Animals" (right). The illustration below is from* Esquire *magazine and depicts "Arab" leaders. Yasser Arafat and the non-Arab Shah of Iran are stabbing swords into the globe.*



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bic-speaking origin in America, Jabara took the Justice Department to court.

In recent years Arab-Americans have also developed organizations to articulate their interests—such as the National Association of Arab-Americans (NAAA), the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) and ADC. Events in the Middle East have no doubt played a role as well. Especially since 1973, there has been a general tendency to assert and to validate rather than to repress Arab ethnicity. Sons and daughters of assimilated Arab-Americans, who were not taught Arabic by their parents, are rediscovering their roots, and studying Arabic as a foreign language in our universities.

Despite these signs of improvement, the American stereotype of Arabs continues to be essentially negative. American popular culture still presents Arabs as villains and buffoons. The same people who would find ethnic slurs about Blacks or Jews distasteful—as well they should—somehow see nothing wrong when the target is Arabs. The result is that, probably more than any other ethnic group, Arabs are maligned in American popular culture. It remains to be seen whether Arabs in America will accede to the fundamental ethnic respect which is due them and which should be accorded to all human beings.

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Romberg, Sigmund (music); Otto Harbach and Oscar Hammerstein, 2nd (words), "The Desert Song" (song). Harms, Inc., copyright 1926.

Romberg, Sigmund (music); Otto Harbach and Oscar Hammerstein, 2nd (words). "The Riff Song" (song). Harms, Inc., copyright 1926.

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